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ENERGY (CHI) IN MARTIAL ARTS AND ELSEWHERE

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of energy has always aroused interest in humans. From the earliest times, our forefathers must have been fascinated by tales of unusual feats, as they were sitting around the fire recounting experiences in hunting and combat. Or retelling others' deeds where valour and power/ energy played roles. The human mind, for better or worse, is much attracted to thoughts of dominion over others.

The Chi I will write about is that energy that peoples of all ages and climes have perceived of as running through the universe and everything in it, although they may not consciously have thought about it in those terms. Although Chi is often talked about, at least in Martial Arts circles, nobody seems to be able to define it exactly. It does not limit itself to energy of the body. Nor is it energy used exclusively in martial arts. It is perhaps not even the real Chi. Maybe Chi (as in the chinese concept), like the Tao, cannot be known.

“He who knows, tells it not,
He who tells, knows it not”

When I first decided to write about this, I thought it would be relatively simple. Surely the concept of Chi - always talked about,

always extolled as the panacea of martial arts - must be clearly explained somewhere. Like a scientific subject, it certainly must have been analysed and dissected, and put back together again, in true Cartesian fashion? But it appears now that I would have done better trying to explain the origin of the universe. More concrete ideas have been expressed on that subject, more literature could be referenced. Especially if I had had enough knowledge of some obscure branch of mathematics or probability theory. I could then have proposed my own interpretation of the subject, in a way that nobody could follow. Thus my ideas would take on a sort of pseudo-respectability. Chi, however, fundamental as it is to the proper functioning of the universe, does not lend itself to this type of manipulation. It is probably too simple and basic for superficial treatment.

BACKGROUND

The idea of energy permeating the Universe is probably as old as the human race. In various accounts of creation, be it in Norse or Greek mythology, Hinduism or Christianity, power and energy were considered the driving force. Violent cataclysms (like the Big Bang) often were thought to have preceeded creation. In Nordic mythology for example, we see a connection between undefined power and creation of specific nature. The guardians of the power and energy, Midgårdssormen (a snake, encircling the earth), and Yggdrasil (vast

tree covering the world with its life-giving limbs) preserve the energy. Only when they are destroyed can the world disappear. After the vanishing of the world, it will reappear once more. Cyclicity of life was apparent even in 800 AD when this was first written down in ancient Nordic runes and perhaps much earlier, transmitted in the oral tradition !

Energy and power, apart from the more obvious uses we have for them in our normal, civilized life, also appear to have uses not commonly thought of. We have now and then been fascinated by tales about superhuman power expressed by ordinary, weak humans, in times of crisis. The mother lifting the rear of a car with her hands to release the child pinned underneath or similar stories. Or the woman running down a little used trail where she suddenly encounters a man with a knife, blocking the path. And how she suddenly 'realizes' that he can not hurt her. So without a glance at him or his knife, she runs right past him without incident. Or the small child summoning energy from who knows where, to assist a friend who is grabbed by two much older boys. Somewhere, somehow these people were able to tap into a source of energy and power normally not easily accessible to people.

PATHS OF ENERGY IN NATURE

Power or energy "spots" have been recognized in various parts of the world all through written history and before. Different peoples of different cultures have sought and venerated such places. In nature, places of energy were often mountains, springs, other

bodies of water such as ponds and confluences of rivers or streams, and clefts in rock. Such places were considered conduits of energy flows, which could be used by people for personal purposes. On the other hand, plains without water or any special geomorphic expression were considered lacking in Chi.

The “Art of Placement” or “Feng Shui”, according to the Chinese, is the art of knowing how best to utilize places of energy for personal advantage in both location of buildings, as well as in interior design. For example, too strong an energy flow was not necessarily considered a good thing, as it might ‘sweep away’ the good fortune, or overpower an unfortunate land owner. But too weak or absent energy, as might be found on arid plains, were not good either, as people and livestock would wither and die, or at least not prosper. Sarah Rossbach, in her book “Feng Shui” likens the goal of Feng Shui practitioners to that of acupuncturists in that they both tap into the Chi, the former into the Earth’s Chi, the latter into a person’s.

The Chi which Feng Shui practitioners try to use to their advantage sometimes expresses itself in the likeness of animals or humans. So, for example can a mountain resemble a dragon or a tiger or a rat. It makes a great difference to people living in the area if it looks like a benevolent dragon or a ferocious beast. A case recorded in “Feng Shui” by Ann Rossbach involved repeated crop failures in a village in China’s Kwangtung province. A Feng Shui specialist was called, and he discovered that the hills behind the village had the outline of a giant rat. The cause of the trouble was clear. The rat

ate the crops. A remedy was implemented. A giant rattrap gateway was constructed, and from that year on, crop yields improved!

In our modern world it frequently happens that money - not Chi - dictates where roads are located or buildings erected, even in China.... According to Feng Shui experts, the results can be disastrous (modern environmentalists sometimes certainly agree!). In China and Hong Kong, examples abound where a modern day construction project has had to be reconsidered because of accidents and other manifestations of disturbed energy flow associated with it. Belatedly a Feng Shui expert then would have to be called to fix what went wrong in the first place. Ann Rossbach's book makes for interesting reading on this subject. It is filled with anecdotal information on geomancy/Feng Shui.

PATHS OF ENERGY IN PEOPLE

Nature's energy naturally affects people. The pulsing of Chi in the environment is mirrored by the constantly changing Chi within us. The orientals teach the changing of yin and yang (a concept that commonly is described by the occidentals as the receptive principle vs. the activating) as the driving force of the Chi. Here the definitions become obscure, as can be expected when the fundamentals of Tao are involved, and a leap of faith is necessary. The human body is powered by Chi, like everything else in the universe.

In the body Chi flows mainly in certain channels called

meridians. There are twelve major meridians which distribute the energy flow in the body. There is also a set of auxiliary meridians, which collect and store energy for later use. Along the meridians are located numerous points which can be stimulated by pressure or needling to adjust the energy flow. Imbalance in energy flow brings on illness, and the extensive knowledge of re-adjusting the balance, (preserved in China and other parts of the Orient) is increasingly being used in western medicine.

The pressure points can also be overstimulated, such as in a blow. The result can be anything from an unpleasant tingling to immobilization of a body part to death, depending on the force used and the pressure point in question.

One of the most interesting and intriguing aspects of Chi in the body is the claims of religious and martial arts masters that the Chi can be manipulated by mind. The claims range from the remarkable to the fantastic.

USES

What do we need this energy for? Would it really have any uses that would be worth anything beyond the curiosity aspect?

Definitely. If we could summon it at will, it could be used for individual rejuvenation, health, transmitting it to others in need and for defense (martial arts). We would be invincible! But that is not Nature's plan for us. Or is it?

In 'Bone Games', author Rob Schultheis explores his own experience of a miraculous rescue from an ill-conceived mountain

climb in the foothills of Boulder, as well as experiences of unusual energy exploits in other people. They have one thing in common - they all seem to have transcended their normal human awareness by being exposed to circumstances which catapulted them, often at feelings of unbearable exhaustion or fear, into a different level of being.

MARTIAL ARTS

We can sometimes make inroads into the use of power and energy, and direct them at our disgression. "The Unfettered Mind" is a collection of advice in essay- form from the Zen Master, Takuan Soho, to a Sword Master. In that book we encounter mysterious suggestions. Takuan Soho was a Zen monk and artist who lived in Japan between 1573 - 1645. His advice to the budding martial artist is to be aware where the mind is kept. He then lists where the mind is not to be kept - a very long list. A more positive approach would be much more to the liking of us westerners..... Anyway, the gist of it all is to have perfect control over your mind, the control which Patanjali already told us about, something which few of us can or want to accomplish (more on this below)

Then "The Unfettered Mind" changes gears and tells the reader that the mind must not stop anywhere but must be allowed to flow in some particular but still dynamic state. It appears that Takuan Soho means that the mind facilitates, or at least does not stand in the way of, a subconscious energy flow in the body. This will permit

the martial artist to tune in with his opponent and effortlessly respond to his moves as needed. However, if we permit fear or any other emotion to become uppermost in our minds, the flowing will stop, and we may get hurt. Most of us have probably experienced this in sparring at some time or other. Everything has gone effortlessly, we seem to do all the right things at the right times and then suddenly.....we become aware of this surprising state of affairs!! At which very point everything comes to a screeching halt, and we get in the way of the opponents left hook or eat his side kick.

The breath is the link which connects us with the energy surrounding us, together with the ability of calming our senses. In every martial art and meditative practice, we are taught not so much how to breath, as how important it is to breath correctly. Unfortunately, few of us pay attention until we are compelled to because we are about to die from lack of breathing. Sparring a vigorous opponent does not work well unless we avail ourselves of some of the oxygen in the dojang. I suspect that books have been written on the subject of breathing, even if they have not been translated into English. It does not seem like a subject that would sell very many copies in this society. There is an exception. One contemporary author, Thich Nath Hanh, a vietnamese Zen monk, has written much about the importance of breathing correctly - and yes, written in English.

HOW CAN WE DEVELOP ABILITY TO ACCESS OR PROJECT CHI?

According to both physics and metaphysics, everything in the Universe is energy, in one way or another. Matter can be transformed into energy, but we have not yet been able to go the other way around. However, religious accounts of such 'reverse' transformations are not rare, especially in eastern religions. How can we then develop the ability to project or access energy and or power? Remember what Takuan Soho said about mind control - it is at the center of everything. Without it we can not project chi or anything else, and can only access chi accidentally, if at all. The deeper we look into the "how", the further we are forced to wander into domains not normally traversed.

In a book "The Yoga Sutras" by a Hindu sage by the name Patanjali is outlined what the true powers of man should be, and how to get there. It is a small book, less than ten pages in the original, with logical, step by step instructions. Easy? Try it! To tintillate your desires let me mention that the powers the author discusses would make the epic "Thousand and One Nights" pale by comparison, although many of the same powers are used in it.

Here we come to a road which takes us on a spiritual journey. In Eastern philosophy no strict separation between the spritual, psychical and physical man is made. Although most humans are enmeshed in the physical and psychical modes of being, the spiritual side can become manifest, in which case no barriers remain for outward expression. But only after four preliminary steps have been taken. Are you ready? The first one is to follow the proscptions

common to all true religions - the Thou-shalt-not's. After the adept has mastered them, (not in action only, but at least as importantly, in thought.....!) come the prescriptions. Prescriptions are the things we should express in our daily interaction with others -- the compassion, kindness, love, and joy. Step three deals with the body - still the body, keep a straight spine, focus on the subject you have chosen, become one with that. Step four is what has been variously referred to as 'self-realization', nirvana or satori. In other words, this reads as a meditation manual, with emphasis on bringing out the spiritual. (Not all meditation concerns itself with that!). Sadly, Patanjali's explanation of how to fully develop our powers by now seems to be too much for most of us. As the commentator Charles Johnston, writing in the introduction to the English version of The Yoga Sutras (1912), points out....

"Patanjali, like every great spiritual teacher, meets the question: "What must I do to be saved?" with the age-old answer: Keep the commandments. Only after the disciple can say, "These have I kept", can there be the further and finer teaching of the spiritual Rules. It is therefore, vital for us to realize that the Yoga system, like every true system of spiritual teaching, rests on this broad and firm foundation of honesty, truth, cleanness, obedience. Without these, there is no salvation; and he who practises these, even though ignorant of spiritual things, is laying up treasure against the time to come".

It is interesting to observe our own mind as part of the exercise of concentrating. It takes on a life of its own in its violent efforts not to be controlled by us. Our mind has been allowed to be undisciplined, uncontrolled for so long, that when we finally attempt to subdue it, we are in for a real struggle. And without mind control we can not consciously access or project Chi. We now can see what the eastern philosophers mean when they state that it is far easier to control the cobra and the tiger, easier to rule the world, than it is to rule one's own mind. So writes, for example, Thayumanavar, an ancient saint from South India:

You may control a mad elephant;
You may shut the mouth of the bear and the tiger;
Ride the lion and play with the cobra;
By alchemy you may earn your livelihood;
You may wander through the universe incognito;
Make vassals of the gods; be ever youthful;
You may walk on water and live in fire;
But control of the mind is better and more difficult.

(from Autobiography of a Yogi, Yogananda, 1946)

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